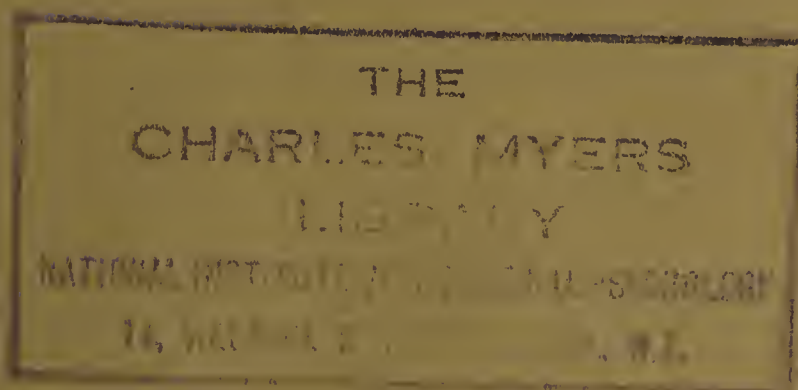


THE SERVANT PROBLEM

BY

CHARLES S. MYERS



Reprinted from

Occupational Psychology, Volume xiii, Number 2, April 1939

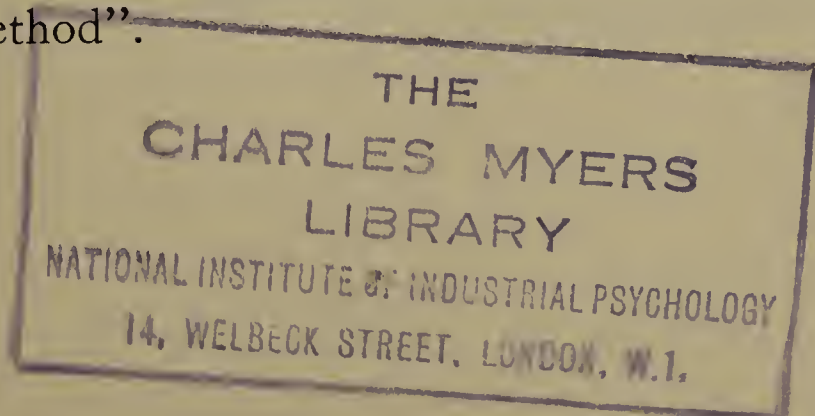
The Servant Problem

By CHARLES S. MYERS

More women enter domestic service than any other occupation. In this article Dr. Myers describes the causes of the present defective quality and quantity of domestic servants. He draws special attention to the need for improvement in their social status, domestic relations, working conditions, selection and training, and to the increasing mechanization in household work and other modern changes which, he considers, will help to solve the servant problem.

THE DOUBLE NATURE OF THE PROBLEM

THIS problem presents two aspects—the one relating to the present defective *quality* of domestic servants, the other to their present defective *quantity*. The former is by no means of recent origin: I have met with an extract from a letter written about 1470 by a Mrs. Jane Stonor to Thomas, her husband, wherein she complains that “servantes be not so delygent as thei were wonto bee”; and I am informed that in 1724 Defoe wrote a treatise entitled “The great Law of Subordination Considered—or the Insolence and Unsufferable Behaviour of Servants in England Duly Inquired into”. Still nearer our own times, in a manual published in 1856 for use in the National Schools at Finchley (then a country village), the complaint is made against domestic servants that “they profess themselves competent to do this thing, and that and the other; pretending to do *everything* they can do *nothing* and this is the result of *ignorance* and *want* of method”.



On the other hand, the problem arising from the insufficient *quantity* of domestic servants is a comparatively new one. There can be no doubt that with modern improvements in the national standard of living, many more families are employing domestic servants—if only one apiece, and if only that part-time—than ever before. Even if the number of households each employing say five or more servants has tended to diminish, the number of those employing one ~~to~~^{or} two has enormously increased. And while the demand for domestic servants has thus been growing, the supply has unquestionably been diminishing. This is shown by the decreasing number of domestic servants recorded in the census-returns ever since 1881—a feature which has been markedly accentuated since the end of the Great War. Nevertheless, the number of private domestic workers in Great Britain at the present time is estimated at 1½ millions: far more women enter domestic service than any other employment. In some of the Dominions and in parts of the United States the servant problem is even more acute: it appears also to be prevalent in varying degrees throughout most of Europe.

The causes of the problem are fairly certain, and they are fairly numerous. But without a clear understanding of them, it is hopeless to attempt to consider whether, and, if so, how the problem can be solved.

THE ATTRACTIONS OF OTHER EMPLOYMENT

One obvious cause lies in the modern opportunities for work other than domestic service, and under conditions apparently more attractive. In former days girls belonging to what was then termed 'the servant class', who wished to earn a living, had no alternative but to take up domestic service. Now they are welcomed as retail saleswomen and cash-clerks in shops, as clerks in offices, or as skilled or unskilled workers in factories. During the Great War large numbers of these girls found employment in munition factories, where they enjoyed greater liberty than had ever been possible in domestic service, often exchanging the uniformity and dullness of

country life for the more varied amusements and the brighter attractions, as it seemed to them, offered by the towns.

Consider for a moment what advantages employment in shops, offices and factories offer – fixed hours of work, complete liberty every week-day evening and Sunday and one week-day afternoon every week, a fuller corporate life, and ampler opportunities for amusement, physical exercise and the meeting of friends. It means, too, entering a recognized 'occupation' that provides unemployment benefit, when necessary, and one that enjoys a higher social status than domestic service. Is it surprising that, with modern education and the modern desire for independence and escape from the hitherto almost feudal conditions of domestic service, the brighter girls should prefer to work behind the counter, in the office or in the factory, rather than to 'go into service', neglectful of the advantages of greater security of employment, better food, and closer personal sympathy which are obtainable under a good mistress in a good home? For these and other reasons so many country girls, except the very dull and incompetent, flock into the towns; servant girls who are at all intelligent refuse to accept work in country houses; and even in the big towns they are hard to find.

SOCIAL STATUS AND DOMESTIC RELATIONS

I have just alluded to the low social status of the domestic servant. At the present time she finds it difficult, if not impossible, to join a club composed of other kinds of workers derived from much the same social class. Should she choose to take her holiday in one of the workers' hostels in the country or at the seaside, she is warned that if she wishes to enjoy herself she must carefully hide her occupation from her fellow holiday-makers there. She has been too often parodied on the stage as the 'skivvy' or dirty slut of the inferior boarding house, and derided on account of her working conditions or supposed short-comings, much as the plumber is ridiculed for his proverbial misdeeds.

A servant is defined in Murray's New English Dictionary

as "one who is under obligation to work for the benefit of a superior and to obey his (or her) commands". That is not an unfair description of the mistress-maid relation as it has existed until recent times. It differs mainly from the far earlier owner-slave relation in that the slave was the property of his owner, whereas the maid was paid for her work and could at once terminate her engagement whenever she so wished. The maid was at best treated by her mistress in the old family spirit, much as in pre-factory days the manual worker received paternal treatment from his master. But in the present age of huge mechanized concerns, the latter relation has fundamentally changed: it is a relation no longer between master and man, but between employer (or manager) and employee. The relation no longer resembles that of *father* to son. The modern employee aims at being regarded as a *brother* or 'partner' in the industrial concern, with the ideal of employer and employee having an equal respect and consideration for each other and for each other's difficulties.

A corresponding change tends now to be taking place in the replacement of the mistress-maid relation by the employer-employee relation in household work. The domestic servant is beginning to seek the conditions of the factory- or office-employee, in her demand that, instead of being engaged as a whole-time worker, she shall sell her labour for a definite daily period of time, and that she has a right at other times to full liberty instead of receiving 'time off', as she has so commonly received it up to the present, ~~though~~ in the guise of a generous gift from a bountiful mistress.

How much would be lost or gained by the servant, by the mistress, and by the community, if this radical change of relationship could be, and were to be, generally adopted would take too long for consideration here. But it is worth pointing out that if the old paternal relation of master to man has been lost in the industrial and commercial world, the old maternal relation has now almost disappeared in the relation of mother to daughters in home life. She is no longer the strict disciplinarian and dictator of former days, but assumes the *rôle* rather of the elder sister. She no longer expects

unquestioning obedience, but owes her authority rather to mutual love, confidence and good-will and to a sympathetic understanding of her children's difficulties, troubles and grievances.

May not a somewhat similar elder-sister relation also help in the solution of the 'servant problem'? May not closer co-operation and a certain sense of 'partnership' in the running of a home help to change the modern attitude of so many young servants who selfishly and light-heartedly regard their careers as a series of restless adventures in successive 'situations,' each of which, after brief service, they leave at the first feelings of dissatisfaction or boredom? May they not thus be brought to realize that, if democracy is to endure, the individual liberty gained under it involves voluntary surrender to certain social obligations and to social order—the willingness to contribute to the welfare of the community and not merely the desire to get all they can out of it?

Let us here note what changes the most progressive employers in commerce and industry have made in modern times to improve the status, efficiency and loyalty of their employees. They have recognized the need for careful selection and for systematic training of their workers. They endeavour to acquaint them on entry with the history, policy and reputation of the firm, and not infrequently with the *social* importance of their work, showing them the value of their work to the general community, and dispelling the dictionary view that as servants they are "under obligation" to work merely "for the benefit of a superior" and blindly "to obey his or her commands." So far as possible, the reasons for learning to do an operation in this way rather than in that are explained to the industrial worker during training, and reasons for the issue of new orders and new regulations are, so far as possible, also explained.

The social status, the efficiency and the loyalty of the domestic servant must be similarly raised so that its honourable and skilled calling becomes universally recognized. Socially useless domestic service cannot deserve much longer to be demanded. For what right, it may be asked, has a lazy,

uncultured, wealthy mistress, or her daughters, bent purely on a life of bridge, racing, dancing and other so-called 'society pleasures', to lie in bed till eleven o'clock in the morning and expect any self-respecting person to attend to all their whims and fancies, performing work as useless, as needless and socially as degrading as, say, the manufacture of a satin-wood, silk-lined coffin to receive the dead body of their darling pet dog? Contrast it with the value of the work done by a servant in valeting (or 'maiding') a busy member of the House of Lords or Commons or a socially useful professional or business man or woman, in preparing or serving food for their household, in nursing their children, in keeping their house clean and tidy or in admitting callers? Such work is as necessary for the life of the social or family organization as is the work of the stomach in preparing food for absorption, or the work of the muscles in executing bodily movements, for the life of the brain, and indeed, for the life of the whole individual organism. Can the brain, as in the old fable, afford to despise the work of the stomach or of the muscles? Can society any more afford to despise the work and calling of the domestic servant? We cannot expect to raise her social status to that of the parson, the doctor or the teacher. But we should recognize that all four are 'occupations', fulfilling important *social* functions, and that none of them can be regarded as directly increasing the employer's *personal* financial profit.

SERVANTS' TRADE UNION AND DEPARTMENTAL COMMITTEE RECOMMENDATIONS

In these circumstances, and in these times, it is hardly surprising that on July 1st last, under the Trades Union Council, a National Union of Domestic Workers was inaugurated with an initial application of twelve hundred persons for membership, and with the object of advancing their social and economic interests, and of assisting them in the regulation of working conditions and rates of pay, and in other ways. It is also noteworthy that the Ethel Wood Report of the Committee appointed in 1923 by the Ministry of Labour to

inquire into the present conditions as to the supply of female domestic servants, recommended that the Unemployment Insurance Scheme should no longer, as at present, be restricted to those domestic workers who are employed in hotels, restaurants, etc., carried on for the purposes of gain, but should be extended to private (female) domestic servants, and that as an alternative to unemployment benefit, a pension of 15s. per week should be available at the age of 55, continuing until the old-age pension becomes payable. A marriage dowry has also been suggested as an alternative.

OCCUPATIONAL SELECTION

If we are to improve the reputation of domestic employment, careful selection, and, particularly when (as now) the demand far exceeds the supply, systematic and thorough training are essential. Systematic selection should be possible along the same lines of testing for the required innate abilities and of assessing traits of temperament and character as are being increasingly introduced in the guidance and selection of candidates where other careers are considered.

OCCUPATIONAL TRAINING

With the exception of cooking, a servant's work is commonly regarded as work that can be performed by anyone, picked up anyhow by anyone, needing no particular qualities of ability and temperament, and no systematic training. This is absolutely false: the domestic servant's occupation is a skilled one, and demands for success in it definite abilities and definite traits of temperament and character. Education Authorities seldom provide, although they are empowered to provide, adequate opportunities and accommodation for instruction in domestic subjects in elementary or secondary schools. Adequate instruction in these subjects should surely be obligatory for every elementary schoolgirl between the ages of 12 and 14, even if it is only to prepare her for house work in her parents', or in her future, home. There is indeed need for training courses in housewifery in schools which

are attended by potential mistresses as well as by potential maids. Many mistresses of to-day, in their utter ignorance of, and lack of interest in household work, thoroughly deserve the indifferent domestic servants they get. Maintenance grants, the Wood Report says, should be more often awarded to girls in secondary and in technical schools in order to encourage the training of future teachers in domestic science.

More training centres for domestic employment need to be established throughout the country for entry at the school-leaving age, the course of training lasting at least six months, and these centres subsequently 'placing' the girls in conjunction with the Local Juvenile Employment Committee. Such training would help to ease the contrast between the too frequent present lack of discipline in their homes and the discipline needed as soon as they enter domestic service. It would also relieve them of the discouraging ill-treatment which they often receive at the hands of harsh ignorant servants under whom they are placed to receive the rudiments of training when they accept a situation totally untrained. If every domestic servant received a systematic, certificated, technical training, instead of picking up her methods haphazard without proper apprenticeship, in the course of premature employment, much would be done to raise the present low level of domestic service and to abolish its ill-repute among school-teachers who not unnaturally now tend to advise their brighter and more diligent pupils to avoid household work as a future career.

IMPROVED WORKING CONDITIONS

But, above all, the working conditions of domestic service need improvement, if it is to be made more attractive. These, of course, vary enormously in different households according to their size, the number and characters of the servants employed, and their mistress's knowledge, kindness and understanding sympathy. Recent systematic inquiries among women engaged in factory work have demonstrated that they attach far less importance to high wages than to felt security of

employment, comfortable working conditions, congenial fellow workers, friendly treatment and sympathetic supervision¹. The same holds undoubtedly for domestic servants. In the larger houses, a servant may have to share a bedroom with another utterly uncongenial to her, seldom getting the opportunity of being by herself: in the smallest flat or other residence, on the other hand, she may suffer from intolerable loneliness. Whether in a mansion or in a cottage or flat, both sleeping and working conditions are too often most unsatisfactory. I have visited the servants' quarters of huge Mayfair residences, where the ventilation and lighting of the kitchens and sculleries were such that I was surprised that any human being could be found to work under such conditions; and where the bedrooms were often mere cubby-holes, sometimes windowless and lit by a skylight, or even box-rooms totally devoid of daylight and ventilation. I heard the other day of a cook who, after seeing her future bedroom before she accepted an engagement in one of the *modern* blocks of flats erected in the same fashionable district, at once decided to seek a place elsewhere. The architect of modern flats seems to think that any small hole and that the most miserable illumination and ventilation will be adequate for a servant's bedroom.

In the smaller houses she will commonly have no opportunity for a bath, no accommodation for storing clothes, and no provision will be made for her comfort when off duty. Her daily hours may run from 6 or 6.30 in the morning until 10.15 or later at night; her meals are frequently interrupted; her 'hours off' are often curtailed or at the last moment changed; and during her 'hours off' she may not be free to leave the house, but is expected to be within call. She is seldom praised for good work; she is always faced with the contrast between her employer's mode of life and her own; a distinction is drawn between servants' food and the food 'upstairs'; and she is too often treated as a menial belonging to a lower order of humanity by her master and mistress and (which she resents most) with unrebuked rudeness or ridicule by the children of the family. Owing to the inferiority complex thus engendered, she may object to being addressed as 'Jane'

or 'Smith' while her school friends, who have become shop-attendants or clerks, are addressed—in her view more courteously—by the prefix 'Miss.' She shares virtually none of their opportunities for athletic, cultural or aesthetic activities during her far more scanty leisure. She has little opportunity for meeting male friends and she is usually forbidden to receive visitors; domestic service is stated to show the lowest marriage frequency of any occupation.

Of course there are good homes and there are considerate, sympathetic mistresses. But the richest employers may, in their recent origin, be too near to the social level of servants to treat them otherwise than as contemptible inferiors; and, perhaps for this reason, they are also so treated by many of by far the most numerous class of servant-employers—those who can only afford one 'general' servant. It is wonderful how by those in the poorest strata of society sympathetic help is mutually and unselfishly rendered during distress; they freely assist one another but they never have the opportunity of considering others in a stratum *lower* than their own. To-day there is an increasing number of mistresses drawn from the masses, and these have yet to learn the traditional altruism and the unpaid social services rendered by the governing classes towards classes inferior to their own. They are like the proverbial officer who has risen from the ranks, or the self-made plutocratic employer who has been too recently exploited himself to resist the temptation of exploiting others when he has the chance.

PUBLIC OPINION AND VOLUNTARY HELP

The grievances of domestic servants have only to be stated for the remedies, which will diminish the unpopularity of domestic service, to become clear. It has been recommended—and indeed this has in a few districts been carried out—that standard conditions of domestic work should be prepared by the Women's Committees of Voluntary Local Employment Committees which are attached to Employment Exchanges throughout the country, and that these Committees should form

local associations of mistresses and servants to agree on conditions of hours, pay, holidays, accommodation, etc., within their respective areas. A Household League of United Service has been recently formed with the same object. This, if accompanied by suitable publicity in the Press, by broadcasting, and by other means, may at first sight appear to be a better plan than the imposition by a Trade Union of rigid minimal conditions in and outside London, regardless of local variations and emergencies; and it has the further advantage of effecting the wider and better education of public opinion and attitude. But the past conduct of industrial employers does not, as a whole, inspire great hope of the better improvement of the conditions and working hours of domestic service save under compulsion by Trade Unions and legislation. Meanwhile such voluntary bodies as the Young Women's Christian Association, the National Organization of Girls' Clubs, etc., are doing all they can to improve the recreational, educational and social opportunities now offered to domestic servants.

INCREASING MECHANIZATION AND REDUCED DEMANDS

In no small degree mechanization is diminishing the need for much household work. The installation of vacuum sweepers, electric or gas fires and radiators, of hot and cold water supplies in bedrooms, and of Aga, Esse or similar cookers in the kitchen, and the introduction of 'stainless steel' must enormously lighten or abolish the work of carpet-sweeping, fire-tending, bedroom work, and the blacking of iron and the polishing of steel. Much effort and time can be also saved by improvements in lay-out and by better planning of the order in which domestic work is daily carried out. The needless duplication or unpunctuality of meals is often avoidable, and many are now dispensing with the formerly accepted servants' duty of opening the front door to departing visitors and are utilizing, in place of household cooking, the restaurant facilities provided in many modern flats. Many, too, especially those mistresses who are engaged in a daily occupation outside

their homes, are managing without resident servants, and are adopting a shift system of part-time employment, thus enabling older people to be employed who at other times of the day can look after their own families, or enabling young people to be employed who at other times of the day, have to care for their old or invalid parents or young brothers or sisters at home. Fifty years ago the owners of large drapery shops insisted on keeping their employees, both male and female, under lock and key, housing them in large hostels, providing them with their food and bedrooms, and insisting on their returning to these hostels by a fixed early hour at nights. This practice is now relatively obsolete; and there seems no reason why working conditions in the home cannot be so changed that many, if not all, domestic servants, in most, if not in all, social strata, may enjoy similar independence.

CONCLUSION

By these various means – by increasing mechanization, by reduced demands and, above all, by the improvements in the social status and efficiency of domestic service which will result from systematic selection and courses of training, more definitely prescribed hours of work, better working conditions and altered domestic ‘relations’, the servant problem seems far from being insoluble. But it is a problem that will not solve itself: its solution demands the active co-operation of everyone concerned in it.

REFERENCE

- (1) cf. S. Wyatt and J. N. Langdon. *Fatigue and Boredom in Repetitive Work*. Industrial Health Research Board Report No. 77. H.M. Stationery Office, 1937. Pp. 43–56.

